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PATER THE HUMANIST

BY AUGUSTUS RALLI

I

THERE is much talk at the present time of a revival of poetry and the excellences of the "Georgian" poets. Yet the spectator of the modern world, unpenetrated as it is by the spirit of beauty, cannot accept such cheering statements without question. The artistic nature demands enjoyment of life for its complete development; indeed, the plea advanced by some poets for happiness has often seemed excessive; yet there never was a time when the outer experience would accord less with the inward vision of beauty than the present. And in proof of this we may select the instance of Pater, which, in so far as he was the typical artist, lies at the very crossroads of thought. Already he belongs to a past generation, yet he summarizes the difficulties and triumphs of the artist beset by a utilitarian world.

It has been objected to Pater that what he sought was a state of mind rather than a motive for beneficent action, and the student of his life will hardly controvert this statement. Its very eventlessness was characteristic of him, as he himself remarked that the impersonality of *Merimée's* style was an effective personal trait. Like his own *Marius*, it was his custom "to take flight in time from any too disturbing passion." He declined marriage and the graver responsibilities; and it is even recorded that he would at once leave a hotel in which any person spoke to him. He expended his imaginative affections upon the past, and retained a profound mistrust of the actual age in which he lived.

Pater stood for the humanities, as opposed to the utilities and the expediencies; and in an age like the present his indeed would be a voice crying in the wilderness. The academic type of mind, of which he is the greatest example, is tending more and more to eclipse; and even the older uni-

versities are hardly withstanding the attacks of those who desire education to become practical. The pressure of competition is urging the adoption of business principles in every department of life; indeed, the term "business" is becoming the fetish of the twentieth century, as "evolution" was of the later nineteenth. That such preoccupations are antagonistic to the preservation of the ideal element in human nature is an obvious truth; and as a result we see a universal sacrifice of beauty to the lust for gain and an ever-increasing worship of Mammon.

It is well known that man's best nature appears in communion with but one other mind—as the sweetest of all human relationships testifies—that he is acted upon by the presence of numbers to less worthy self-expression. Some such transformation has been effected by the conditions of the modern world. Man's opportunities of retirement have become rarer, his anxieties external, and his hope of success or fear of loss limited to what is material. Agnostics of the type of Cotter Morison exulted in the downfall of orthodox belief, yet it is doubtful whether religion was such a fruitful source of terrors to the average man, and whether the imminence of hell was so unquestioned as they would have us believe. What the men of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did admit was the reality of conscience; and this recognition of an invisible Overseer imparted to the character a dignity in which we who measure all actions according to their acceptability by our fellow-men are lacking. The "religion of humanity," which was to cure all evils and herald the millennium, is looking sadly faded to the thoughtful mind: its message to the worldly man is, "Thou shalt not be found out."

The academic or disinterested type of mind like that of Pater is fast verging upon extinction. One of the most gracious traditions of educated man, the judging of his fellow-creatures according to their individual powers, is being superseded by the brutal standard of "results." That men are either efficient or inefficient is the doctrine of the man of business; and scorn, not tolerance, should be meted to the inefficient. The chance of failure being more admirable than success has passed out of the sphere of practical life.

The artist has always tended to live with himself, but he fetched from the world the stuff of which his dreams are made, and never did one standing at his watch-tower gaze into such

darkness as at the present. For this reason Pater sought inspiration from the past, among those ages where the outer life had some correspondence with the inner vision. But in him, as in all who live remote from the actual world and are debarred from participation in its duties, there is a certain unreality. His style is fundamentally sincere, and the emotions which he derives from the past are genuine, but they give light without warmth. Indeed, he often works in pure light rather than light and shade; but the legendary and historical scenes which he restores to us lie as in the unaccustomed glow of a midnight sun.

After journeying through this land of the midnight sun, to which we may compare Pater's works, and pausing to review our impressions, we find them exceedingly complex. Pater was, above all, an artist, and, secondarily, critic, biographer, philosopher. The ultimate pleasure to be derived from his writings is an emotion, but the chain has been so surrounded by what seems acquired knowledge that a casual touch may not reveal it to be electric. In earlier days a purer form of literature might have suited Pater's genius, but a late civilization absorbs nearly all in criticism, and hence there is some want of balance between his form and content. Nowhere is this trait more salient than in those passages which are autobiographical. His soul comes to us in intellectual semblance, as the goddesses of his beloved Greek mythology veiled their beauty in the disguises of old women. Emotion is generated by the movement of the intellect—we must think in order to feel—and the meaning yields its sweetness in proportion to the intensity of the reader's thought. In the chapter of *Marius the Epicurean*, "The Will as Vision," it is revealed to Marius that he had never for one moment been left spiritually alone in the world, but an unfailing companion had always been by his side. One half regrets that this singularly wistful idea was not disparted from some of its intellectual dress and preached in the outer courts of the Temple, where it might have increased Pater's disciples a thousandfold. Carlyle compared the "Iliad" to a star, growing brighter as it grows more distant; and if we watch the process of the mind in reading, shall we say, Fielding and Thackeray, who, with many points of resemblance, belong to different ages, we see that in the case of Fielding the emotion takes longer to reach us, as his star has receded further through time. Even so, Pater does not

speak to us quite in our own language. The guest is gone before we discover that we have unawares entertained an angel.

II

Under the title *Imaginary Portraits*, which is given to Pater's slenderest volume, the greater portion of his critical work might have been included. One feels that between Pater and his subject there is a deeper subconscious affinity than is usual with criticism. The reason is partly his own happy gift in selecting a kindred nature, for it is said he never wasted time in experimental reading, and partly the period of brooding before composition which he exacted of himself. Indeed, he quotes with approval the ten years' meditation through which Sir Thomas Browne passed before writing *Urn Burial*. Hence, while seeming most impersonal, Pater is often the reverse, and, while apparently absorbed in his subject, he is unconsciously self-analytic. It is hard to write of him, because he has himself made some of the best criticism on his own work. He tells us that Wordsworth's object was "impassioned contemplation"; that Leonardo possessed the art "of tracking the sources of expression to their subtlest retreats"; that Plato had "a sort of sensuous love of the unseen"; that Botticelli "accepts that middle world in which men take no side in great conflicts, and decide no great issues, and make great refusals."

It is in writing of the ancient world that there is some displacement of the balance, and to it we owe Pater's most characteristic work. In *The Child in the House* he tells how, parallel with his susceptibility to beauty, there grew up in him "an almost diseased sensibility to the spectacle of suffering," and, in the most beautiful chapter of *Marius*, how men are constructed for suffering, and feel sorrow in proportion to their moral or nervous perfection. Pater brings this capacity for sorrow to his survey of ancient times, and by a seeming contradiction of his former assertion that the Greek lived a purely outer life he interpolates into the myth of Demeter and Persephone that "worship of sorrow" which is said to be scrupulously modern. He defines romanticism as the desire for a beauty born of unlikely elements, and it is in his conception of the majestic figures of Demeter and Kore that he is romantic. He sees them either at sunrise or sunset, when the shadows which they cast are longest.

Similarly, who does not connect those tender scenes in the *Hippolytus* with Pater's self? We have the "ancient twilight world" with its tradition of celestial visitants remote from the luxuries of Athens, and the mother who is shocked by "a sense of something unearthly in her boy's contentment," or relieved when it becomes "a shade less unconscious." Pater's affections were entwined with the church and the family, as the last institutions to preserve beauty in the modern world.

The habit of protracted meditation which has made of the greater part of Pater's work a kind of disguised autobiography has left its imprint upon his style. Whether one can overdo even such an excellent habit as profound meditation previous to composition is a question that might with all diffidence be asked. We get, it is true, an exact transcript of his thought; but is the thought still alive by the time it reaches the paper after so long a sojourn in the chambers of his brain? Is the reader called upon to make too great an effort toward its reanimation? A writer usually starts upon his subject with a certain number of ideas, and the effort which the brain makes to co-ordinate these generates further ideas. One feels with Pater that he has waited till the process of generation is complete, and only when the descendants of the parent ideas have become infertile does he mark out the genealogical tree. At its worst an air of exhaustion hangs over his page, and nowhere is there the sudden delight of spontaneous generation from the chance meeting of wandering thoughts.

Although the separate parts have been previously completed in Pater's mind and noiselessly joined together so that the Temple rises to no sound of ax or hammer, the reader may test the solidity of the foundation in his interest by his power to be strongly moved by certain phrases or even single words. Such is the term "narcotic" applied to the flowers most appropriately used at the worship of Demeter or the often-repeated comparison to homesickness of man's thought of death.

The essayist was wont to greet us in our own language and speak of topics which we knew well as a means of winning our attention, but in the slow fire of Pater's long-choosing mind all earthly particles have perished, and he conducts us to the upper chamber of his thought not by the common stairway of sense. His message thus seems detached from experience, and the impression resembles that of a vivid dream.

And yet, considering the difficulties of the modern writer

working in an ancient material, this attitude of Pater's seems the only possible one. It was not exclusively the Athenians who demanded some new thing; and the best definition of a bore is one whose sayings may be foretold. When Candide arrived in the El Dorado country he picked up the gold that was lying by the roadside and offered it for payment at an inn, which gold was returned to him with good-humored laughter. Such treatment would be accorded now to the writer who dealt in the simple rhythms and emotions of the older poets. For even the greatest poetry falls less resonantly on the ears of a later generation; it has become part of the common language, and as thousands speak it who have never consciously perused it, the shock of novelty is gone.

An intenser subjectivity, therefore, must distinguish a literature in its old age. In form and content it reflects the author's dread of besieging his reader's ears with a thrice-told tale. And one like Pater, in his anxiety of expending a single word that should draw the reader's attention from his own impression into the wider areas of settled thought, attenuates his meaning to a point that recalls the garment which could only be seen by the virtuous. It advances with an imperceptibility which brings despair to a wandering mind. In glancing back it is almost impossible to say at what moment his message has been delivered, or which is the word that has converted us. The older writers, except in their most perfervid moments, were content to use words which a reader might transform according to his associations; but the severer taste of modern times requires an author to adjure totally this language of the market-place. No word or even portion of its meaning must lie outside the radius of his personality.

The simplicity which a style of this kind gains is not in accordance with our usual understanding of the word. It is the simplicity of age rather than youth; not of one who has small knowledge of books, but who has read deeply and refrains of set purpose from expressing his thought in the terms that recall men's accumulated wisdom. As an instance we may cite that passage in *Gaston de Latour* describing Montaigne's relations with the friend of his life: "Yet, after all, were he pressed to say why he had so loved Étienne de la Boétie, he could but answer: 'Because it was He! Because it was I!'"

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